

PATRICIA KEENEY

Out of Iran

Suddenly Tehran. Gripping the neck.
Flattening hair. Strangling. Pulling. Tugging.
Fidgeting. A bounding woman bound.

I am so wrong ... here. Who is wrong? What is right? Here.

At the bazaar with Mirza. Snaky halls, scented stalls, robes and hands. Long gauzy scarf. Old Persia woven in. Attempting fashion. Collapsing like a tent in hot wind. Silky black square slip/ slides off the curling novice nun I never was. Gentle scarf seller smiles indulgently.

– I can't keep it on.

– Takes time.

Shamed by black eyed lush lipped beauties, cloth coyly draped to hide shape because god is a man. Standing in the hotel lobby trying to neutralize colour, cover flesh, annihilate flair. Aware it is not the men who look. It is the women whose disguise I compromise. Who get arrested for high stepping leather boots.

Hair clips amuse them, tracking wayward waves. Mirza lends soft hued pashminas to settle me. No you don't need the hijab. That's professional.

The professional women of Iran.

Six hundred years ago, a woman played dulcimer. Rich brown curls tumbling down. Resplendent in velvet rose and stitched pearl, she makes a music I can't hear.

Mirza drives below mountains of snow between creamy concrete boxes in rows. Sun sparkled. Quiet and close, her own snug plot rises on narrow stairs windowed all the way up. Small, her place creates space, opening unexpectedly. A bed in the wall. Couch and desk and sweets with lime. Wedding photos. Satin and lace. Another self mincing in strappy

sandals, hair swept up. Diaphanous sundress clinging.

From past to present. Clinging.

Jars and cups and painted vessels full of wine. None for us. Nor closeness of the face. Nor languid touch where blossoms blow and latticed wind through fluted terrace goes. Nor pointing painted toes. Nor feeling all the fabrics of design against soft skin, nature's every outline coloured in.

Paradise then. Persian garden of delights.

Yesterday was hers. Today is what she has.

The Shah's Parisian glitz turned shabby Soviet. Concrete bunkers for hotels.

– I remember it elegant, shyly, she confides
– when I was a schoolgirl.

It is dangerous to remember. And necessary.

Shining domes circle. Their tendrils and stars glow lemon and lime. Dangerous to look.

When trouble breaks she keeps saying revolution instead of demonstration.

– A Freudian slip?

Definitely.

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I'm here to see drama. It's all on the streets where cell phones go dead. And we're hurried from crowds. Where our translator's friend is gunned down, because (runs the story) he looked like police and was mobbed.

So muted on stage. Veiled and distant.

Crackling Attic tragedy rigged and strung up for fierce masters, fanning the clerical flames.

News from the badlands. Rogue troupe.

Something unusual happening. Long ugly taxi

ride south of the city. Chasing beauty through bloody slaughter. Orphaned Afghan youths and angry street slogans. Whoever does the mothering owns the child. Whoever tends the land keeps it.

Two women for three acts talking. While the room fills up with sand. Their mouths, their eyes, their house, their lives — a choking desert dust.

Iranian drama

Intimate writhing twisted to song. A sobbing. A wailing. A soaring.

The grand ancient legend shrunk to a puppet. White wisdom of Rumi, head tilted and happy. Whirling to heaven, expecting all ecstasy. Dancing doll on invisible strings.

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Shops in the street of artisans sell intricate snowflake petals, blue on fragile copper plates. Miniatures of Isfahan. Tiny tiles from heaven. Dishes curved like boats to sail seas of saffron rice. Olives in walnut and pomegranate. – Enriched, she says. We call them enriched olives.

Shady night town sleeps in eerie ghost light, pale bulbs hissing secrets of '79 in tawdry yellow and green.

– The traffic will kill you, Mirza warns, sprinting ahead of us, hospitably dodging deadly wheels. – Watch out for scooters. Probably police in plainclothes.

– Put away your cameras. What are we doing wrong?

One of us doesn't, grips a railing, is told to move on, doesn't. South American, he knows the drill.

– Our passports condemn us. British or American and they think we're all spies.

In deeply gouged gutters, full garbage bags wait for collection, wriggling with rats.

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Inside the folk restaurant, life is good. Stories told with tambour and flute, bouzouki and drum. Cultural sagas twist in their songs. Wrought male voice pitched high as blindness, arms wide to clap his people close. – I love you, Canada.

Then, the flat skin drum. Ecstatic hands. Flying as far as our glaring tundra, as deep as the dreams of Darius. Brooding at the edge of explosion, curtain of hair flinging out, whipping back.

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The most important questions in Mirza's job interview for college teaching are religious. Were you at Friday prayers? What was the Imam's message? She wants to do gender studies and look at plays by women in Iran but her male professors discourage her. – What about the female academics? – They are also passed over, cannot publish.

Carefully she checks her camera. – Why?

– I'm learning photography so I can document the ignored work of women in Iran, such as the hair removal technician or the washer of corpses.

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Paradise now. Under the glistening mountain, rich green dreams. Glass boutiques, marbly. Balconies opening out, spilling down. Lavish escape routes lacing the slopes. Passports and bribes. Parties and dancing and alcohol. Keys to a kingdom of pleasure.

Lost in snow. Treading muddy February roads where hikers trip and chalets grip each sharp brown peak, we suck on shiny crimson sheets of bitter berry. Bracing fun in a high dry sun.

Urban millions, stranded at the palace gate

outside bright tiles that tell such tales. Wishing for wind towers to cool summer fires. No glimmer of them in halls of gleaming mirror multiplying modern heads of state.

Smiling on cue at the queen under glass. Shiny bedroom fixture among vintage TVs and old radios. Monarchs Plugged in. Tuned out. Listening for news from a vanishing life. Needing machines to change minds.

Pausing at the shah's thinking chair to wonder what was in his head?
what did he intend for us?
where are we now?
where is he

elegant son of his father, empty vessel filled with molten steel, shaping guns and tanks to fire off a lie so big, it cannot be denied.

A lie that freezes Sassanids and Achmaenids in matching curls and marching tunics.

A lie that lopped off the wings of women in command and in control. At Persepolis once. Museum beauties now. Relief etched on concrete walls.

In the modern art museum, revolutionary propaganda and holy writ. Angering, consoling.

Early delicate pitchers and curved thin spouts. History clear as glass. Reflecting. Shattered.

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We enter a blue world. Tiled, painted, petalled, arched. Dark wood tables under stewing lamb, pestled into a paste of peas, parsley, lime. Tawny tea and vibrant rosewater pastries.

– It looks like my grandmother's house, says Mirza, worries I won't like this tradition.
– Things have improved because now a woman can divorce her husband if he has not paid her the housekeeping fee.
That's enlightened, I say.

– But if he has beaten her for neglecting her job she cannot divorce him.

Enthusiastically, she goes on

– I had to get permission from my husband for a passport with unlimited travel.

Her fine young man beams intelligently at me.

Did you give it?

– With my blessing!

Pale walls and gleaming wood. Carpet curtains. Wrought iron windows. Railings draped around eating.

– It is all they allow us to do. So we eat and we eat. Joyfully.

Try this and this and this.

With salty watered yogurt whitening our nights, our every meal and conversation converting us to calm acceptance, insisting we have health

Ingesting god.

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In the hotel, hotly packing to leave. Wanting to stay.

If you have no unnecessary travel, warns the embassy... Necessary for whom? Whose need to be here? Who needs to be here?

Lured down to the lobby for good-byes. Last conversations.

– How can we build a national theatre. Like you have in Canada?

First comes the freedom to fail

– Such a pleasure to meet you. Poetry is my passion too. Don't be upset for me. I am used to this prison. I grew up with the bombs. I have lived all my life in dark colours, not dancing

covering my hair.

Patricia Keeney's poetry appears earlier in this volume.